

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS
DALLAS DIVISION

JOHN FRANCIS,
TDCJ No. 2253451, §
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§
Plaintiff,
V.
JOHN DOE,
Defendant.
No. 3:24-cv-822-D-BN

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATION OF THE UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE

This lawsuit was opened based on correspondence from Plaintiff John Francis, a Texas prisoner, which has been construed as a civil complaint raising claims under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. *See* Dkt. No. 3.

Senior United States District Judge Sidney A. Fitzwater referred the construed Section 1983 complaint to the undersigned United States magistrate judge for pretrial management under 28 U.S.C. § 636(b) and a standing order of reference.

And the undersigned entered a Notice of Deficiency and Order Regarding Complaint and Filing Fee (the “NOD”) on April 8, 2024, explaining that

[t]he construed complaint as filed is deficient. Under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8(a)(2), a complaint need not contain detailed factual allegations, but a plaintiff must allege more than labels and conclusions, and, while a court must accept all of the plaintiff's allegations as true, it is "not bound to accept as true a legal conclusion couched as a factual allegation." *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (quoting *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007)).

In fact, “the court does not ‘presume true a number of categories of statements, including legal conclusions; mere labels; threadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action; conclusory statements; and naked assertions devoid of further factual enhancement.’” *Armstrong v.*

Ashley, 60 F.4th 262, 269 (5th Cir. 2023) (quoting *Harmon v. City of Arlington, Tex.*, 16 F.4th 1159, 1162-63 (5th Cir. 2021)).

To survive dismissal, plaintiffs must instead “plead facts sufficient to show” that the claims asserted have “substantive plausibility” by stating “simply, concisely, and directly events” that they contend entitle them to relief. *Johnson v. City of Shelby, Miss.*, 574 U.S. 10, 12 (2014) (per curiam) (citing FED. R. CIV. P. 8(a)(2)-(3), (d)(1), (e)); *see also Inclusive Communities Project, Inc. v. Lincoln Prop. Co.*, 920 F.3d 890, 899 (5th Cir. 2019) (“Determining whether a complaint states a plausible claim for relief is ‘a context-specific task that requires the reviewing court to draw on its judicial experience and common sense.’” (quoting *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679; citing *Robbins v. Oklahoma*, 519 F.3d 1242, 1248 (10th Cir. 2008) (“[T]he degree of specificity necessary to establish plausibility and fair notice, and therefore the need to include sufficient factual allegations, depends on context.”))).

Put differently, a plaintiff, through the complaint, must provide the Court enough factual content to demonstrate an entitlement to relief. Compare *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678 (“A claim has facial plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.”), with *Robbins*, 519 F.3d at 1247 (“The burden is on the plaintiff to frame a ‘complaint with enough factual matter (taken as true) to suggest’ that he or she is entitled to relief.” (quoting *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 556)); *see also Bryant v. Ditech Fin., L.L.C.*, No. 23-10416, 2024 WL 890122, at *3 (5th Cir. Mar. 1, 2024) (“A plaintiff can allege that objects dropped in water generally get wet; the defendant dropped an object in water; and that it is therefore highly likely the object got wet. Sure, it is possible that the defendant’s particular object somehow escaped the water by landing on a boat or an animal. But just as plaintiffs cannot state a claim using speculation, defendants cannot defeat plausible inferences using speculation.”).

And, to the extent that Francis specifically intends to allege violations of his constitutional rights, many of the prison conditions described in the construed complaint – for example, Francis’s not receiving a “pm snack” or his being told by a lieutenant that “2 of the 3 meals would be hot and other sandwiches” – do not rise to a level of constitutional magnitude, and thus Section 1983 claims based on such alleged conditions should be summarily dismissed for failure to state a claim on which relief may be granted. *See, e.g., Berry v. Brady*, 192 F.3d 504, 507 (5th Cir. 1999) (“To establish an Eighth Amendment claim, the prisoner must demonstrate, *inter alia*, an objective component of conditions so serious as to deprive him of the minimal measure of life’s necessities, as when denied some basic human need.”) For example, “[t]he deprivation of food constitutes cruel and unusual punishment only

if it denies a prisoner the minimal civilized measure of life's necessities." So, "[e]ven on a regular, permanent basis, two meals a day may be adequate." (cleaned up)).

Absent plausibly alleged constitutional violations, federal courts will not interfere with the management of a state prison. *See Preiser v. Rodriguez*, 411 U.S. 475, 491-92 (1973) ("It is difficult to imagine an activity in which a State has a stronger interest, or one that is more intricately bound up with state laws, regulations, and procedures, than the administration of its prisons."); *Valentine v. Collier*, 993 F.3d 270, 294 (5th Cir. 2021) (Oldham, J., concurring) ("Federal judges are particularly ill-equipped to manage state prisons: 'Three years of law school and familiarity with pertinent Supreme Court precedents give no insight whatsoever into the management of social institutions.' (quoting *Brown v. Plata*, 563 U.S. 493, 558 (2011) (Scalia, J., dissenting))).

To address these deficiencies in the complaint as filed, and to facilitate the Court's screening of Francis's claims, attached to this order is a form civil rights complaint – prisoner that Francis must complete, date and sign, and return to the Court by **May 9, 2024**.

Failure to do so will result in a recommendation that this action be dismissed for failure to prosecute and obey a court order. *See* FED. R. CIV. P. 41(b).

The Court also CAUTIONS Francis that it will not screen the complaint as filed (or an amended complaint should one be filed) until either (1) the \$405.00 filing fee is received or (2) Francis files a proper motion to proceed *in forma pauperis* ("IFP") and attaches to that motion a completed and verified certificate of inmate trust account ("CTA"). Accordingly, also attached to this order is a form application to proceed IFP – prisoner.

If he qualifies to proceed IFP, Francis must complete and file an IFP motion by **May 9, 2023**.

Failure to either pay the full filing fee or file a proper IFP motion supported by a completed and verified CTA by **May 9, 2024** will also result in a recommendation that the complaint be dismissed under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 41(b).

The Court further CAUTIONS Francis that, as the Prison Litigation Reform Act ("PLRA") applies to this case, under the PLRA, "[a] prisoner proceeding IFP in the district court is obligated to pay the full filing fee upon the filing of a complaint. [28 U.S.C.] § 1915(b)(1). [So n]o relief from an order directing payment of the filing fee should be granted for a voluntary dismissal." *Hatchet v. Nettles*, 201 F.3d 651, 654 (5th Cir. 2000) (per curiam) (citing *Williams v. Roberts*, 116 F.3d 1126, 1128 (5th Cir. 1997); *McGore v. Wrigglesworth*, 114 F.3d 601, 607 (6th Cir. 1997)); *see, e.g.*, *Bays v. United States*, No. 3:15-cv-1824-B-BN, 2015

WL 4930913 (N.D. Tex. Aug. 18, 2015).

Dkt. No. 4.

It is now almost four months past the deadline to comply with the NOD, and Francis has failed to do so and or otherwise contact the Court.

Considering this procedural record, the undersigned enters these findings of fact, conclusions of law, and recommendation that the Court should dismiss this action without prejudice under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 41(b).

Legal Standards

Rule 41(b) “authorizes the district court to dismiss an action *sua sponte* for failure to prosecute or comply with [a Federal Rule of Civil Procedure or] a court order.” *Griggs v. S.G.E. Mgmt., L.L.C.*, 905 F.3d 835, 844 (5th Cir. 2018) (citing *McCullough v. Lynaugh*, 835 F.2d 1126, 1127 (5th Cir. 1988) (per curiam)); accord *Nottingham v. Warden, Bill Clements Unit*, 837 F.3d 438, 440 (5th Cir. 2016) (failure to comply with a court order); *Rosin v. Thaler*, 450 F. App’x 383, 383-84 (5th Cir. 2011) (per curiam) (failure to prosecute); *see also Campbell v. Wilkinson*, 988 F.3d 798, 800-01 (5th Cir. 2021) (holding that the text of Rule 41(b) does not extend to a failure to comply with a court’s local rule insofar as that violation does not also qualify as a failure to prosecute (discussing *Berry v. CIGNA/RSI-CIGNA*, 975 F.2d 1188 (5th Cir. 1992))).

This authority “flows from the court’s inherent power to control its docket and prevent undue delays in the disposition of pending cases.” *Boudwin v. Graystone Ins. Co., Ltd.*, 756 F.2d 399, 401 (5th Cir. 1985) (citing *Link v. Wabash R.R. Co.*, 370 U.S. 626 (1962)); *see also Lopez v. Ark. Cnty. Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 570 F.2d 541, 544 (5th Cir.

1978) (“Although [Rule 41(b)] is phrased in terms of dismissal on the motion of the defendant, it is clear that the power is inherent in the court and may be exercised sua sponte whenever necessary to ‘achieve the orderly and expeditious disposition of cases.’” (quoting *Link*, 370 U.S. at 631)); *Campbell*, 988 F.3d at 800 (“It is well established that Rule 41(b) permits dismissal not only on motion of the defendant, but also on the court’s own motion.” (citing *Morris v. Ocean Sys., Inc.*, 730 F.2d 248, 251 (5th Cir. 1984) (citing, in turn, *Link*, 370 U.S. at 631))).

And the Court’s authority under Rule 41(b) is not diluted by a party proceeding *pro se*, as “[t]he right of self-representation does not exempt a party from compliance with relevant rules of procedural and substantive law.” *Wright v. LBA Hospitality*, 754 F. App’x 298, 300 (5th Cir. 2019) (per curiam) (quoting *Hulsey v. Texas*, 929 F.2d 168, 171 (5th Cir. 1991) (quoting, in turn, *Birl v. Estelle*, 660 F.2d 592, 593 (5th Cir. Nov. 1981))).

A Rule 41(b) dismissal may be with or without prejudice. *See Long v. Simmons*, 77 F.3d 878, 879-80 (5th Cir. 1996).

Although “[l]esser sanctions such as fines or dismissal without prejudice are usually appropriate before dismissing with prejudice, ... a Rule 41(b) dismissal is appropriate where there is ‘a clear record of delay or contumacious conduct by the plaintiff and when lesser sanctions would not serve the best interests of justice.’”

Nottingham, 837 F.3d at 441 (quoting *Bryson v. United States*, 553 F.3d 402, 403 (5th Cir. 2008) (per curiam) (in turn quoting *Callip v. Harris Cnty. Child Welfare Dep’t*, 757 F.2d 1513, 1521 (5th Cir. 1985))); *see also Long*, 77 F.3d at 880 (a dismissal with prejudice is appropriate only if the failure to comply with the court order was the result of purposeful delay or contumacious conduct and the imposition of lesser

sanctions would be futile); *Haynes v. Turner Bass & Assocs.*, No. 20-40787, 2022 WL 2383855, at *1 (5th Cir. July 1, 2022) (per curiam) (“A dismissal with prejudice is improper unless the case history evidences both (1) a clear record of delay or contumacious conduct by the plaintiff, and (2) that a lesser sanction would not better serve the best interests of justice. A petitioner’s delay meriting a Rule 41(b) dismissal with prejudice must be longer than just a few months; instead, the delay must be characterized by significant periods of total inactivity. A party’s negligence does not make conduct contumacious; rather, it is the stubborn resistance to authority which justifies a dismissal with prejudice.” (cleaned up)); cf. *Nottingham*, 837 F.3d at 442 (noting that “lesser sanctions” may “include assessments of fines, costs, or damages against the plaintiff, conditional dismissal, dismissal without prejudice, and explicit warnings” (quoting *Thrasher v. City of Amarillo*, 709 F.3d 509, 514 (5th Cir. 2013))).

“When a dismissal is without prejudice but ‘the applicable statute of limitations probably bars future litigation,’ that dismissal operates as – i.e., it is reviewed as – “a dismissal with prejudice.” *Griggs*, 905 F.3d at 844 (quoting *Nottingham*, 837 F.3d at 441); see, e.g., *Wright*, 754 F. App’x at 300 (affirming dismissal under Rule 41(b) – potentially effectively with prejudice – where “[t]he district court had warned Wright of the consequences and ‘allowed [her] a second chance at obtaining service’ but she “disregarded that clear and reasonable order”).

Analysis

By not complying with the NOD – in addition to leaving the impression that he no longer wishes to pursue the claims asserted in this lawsuit – Francis has

prevented this action from proceeding and has thus failed to prosecute.

A Rule 41(b) dismissal of this lawsuit without prejudice is therefore warranted under these circumstances.

Because the undersigned concludes that lesser sanctions would be futile, as the Court is not required to delay the disposition of this case until such time as Francis decides to obey the Court's order or otherwise contact the Court, the Court should exercise its inherent power to prevent undue delays in the disposition of pending cases and *sua sponte* dismiss this action without prejudice under Rule 41(b).

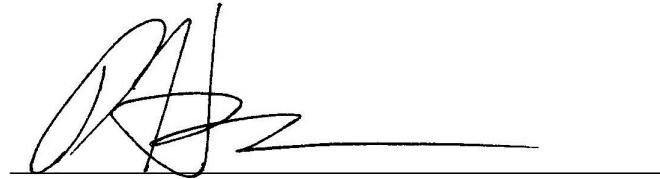
And, while it is not apparent based on the record here that dismissal of this lawsuit without prejudice at this time would effectively be a dismissal with prejudice, insofar as the recommended dismissal may somehow prejudice Francis, these findings, conclusions, and recommendation afford notice, and the opportunity to file objections (as further explained below) affords an opportunity to respond, to explain why this case should not be dismissed for the reasons set out above. *See Carver v. Atwood*, 18 F.4th 494, 498 (5th Cir. 2021) (“The broad rule is that ‘a district court may dismiss a claim on its own motion as long as the procedure employed is fair.’ More specifically, ‘fairness in this context requires both notice of the court’s intention and an opportunity to respond’ before dismissing *sua sponte* with prejudice.” (citations omitted)).

Recommendation

The Court should dismiss this action without prejudice under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 41(b).

A copy of these findings, conclusions, and recommendation shall be served on all parties in the manner provided by law. Any party who objects to any part of these findings, conclusions, and recommendation must file specific written objections within 14 days after being served with a copy. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); FED. R. CIV. P. 72(b). In order to be specific, an objection must identify the specific finding or recommendation to which objection is made, state the basis for the objection, and specify the place in the magistrate judge's findings, conclusions, and recommendation where the disputed determination is found. An objection that merely incorporates by reference or refers to the briefing before the magistrate judge is not specific. Failure to file specific written objections will bar the aggrieved party from appealing the factual findings and legal conclusions of the magistrate judge that are accepted or adopted by the district court, except upon grounds of plain error. *See Douglass v. United Servs. Auto. Ass'n*, 79 F.3d 1415, 1417 (5th Cir. 1996).

DATED: September 5, 2024



DAVID L. HORAN
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE